

# THE RELEVANCE OF ORAL EVIDENCE IN THE RECONSTRUCTION OF AFRICAN HISTORY

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## ABSTRACT

The relevance of oral evidence in the reconstruction of African history cannot be over emphasized. For many years scholars doubted the authenticity of the use of oral history in recording African past, they depended solely on written records derived from European and Arabic sources. It is against this background that this study has become very necessary especially this period of enhancing the standard of education in Nigeria. A detailed and an objective study of African history with emphasis on the development of institutions and people cannot be successfully done using written sources alone. In this study we want to establish that for a thorough study of African history written sources must be authenticated by oral sources.

## INTRODUCTION

Oral source is one of the sources of reconstructing the African past. Henige (1982:106), defined oral history as the practice of interviewing people about their own experiences. Oral evidence concerns itself with what happened in the more recent past, or contemporary issues. It is transmitted by words of mouth. Therefore historians and researchers using this method can still interview eyewitnesses and actual participants on the events they are writing about. For example a researcher on the Nigerian civil war using oral evidence can still see actual participants in the war to interview and their experiences are recorded. Oral evidence could be collected from actual participants through various means which includes oral discussion, personal interviews, tape recorders, video coverage etc.

Oral evidence and oral tradition belong to the same source of unwritten source of recording history. According to Vansina (1961:19) Oral traditions are, all oral testimonies concerning the past which are transmitted from one person to another while Alagoa (1978:9) sees oral tradition as historical information transmitted orally by processes peculiar to each community, and which should be studied first in the context of its culture before being made available for cross-cultural analysis and comparison. Oral tradition includes myths and legends which explains the origins of communities. Myth according to Phillips (1993:76) is true history.

It deals with fundamental realities. It explains the origin of things and why things happen the way they do, and it sets down rules for human behaviour...myth is sacred truth, and is hedged about with taboos against its improper use...in most instances the one who recites the myth is a priest or other privileged functionary to whom the sacred history has been entrusted safeguards against error or lapse or memory are provided in the form of a number of mnemonic (memory-assisting) devices.

Myths are recited before a select audience including those who will succeed the reciters.

Legends are specific type of historical narrative that speaks of times since the beginning after the original founders had departed from the world to become spirits. If

legends are carefully used they can become valuable sources of information. Examples of myths and legends are the Bayajidda stories of the origin of the Hausa states and the belief by the Yoruba that Oduduwa was their ancestor. Oral tradition also include folktales and songs.

Folktales in most cases offer explanations of peculiarities in animal and human behaviour and experience and it may contain moral values which are worthy of emulation. Unlike the myth only persons who have demonstrated that they have qualities of good story telling may tell folktales. Folktales are told during leisure hours. They are not reliable sources of information for the researcher.

Songs are used for recording special events such as the accomplishment of important personalities they are composed in praises of warriors, heroes and kings. Songs can be reliable sources of information.

The main distinction between oral tradition and oral evidence is that while oral tradition is concerned with the more distant past, transmitted by myths, legends, folktales and songs which have been accepted by the community from generation to generation, oral evidence is of a contemporary nature concerned with recent happenings and eyewitness accounts which have not been fully accepted by the society.

### **The Relevance of Oral Evidence in the Study of History**

Oral evidence is very relevant in the study of African history. Commenting on the relevance of oral evidence for the study of the African past, Henige (1982:107) stated that.

Oral history provides an opportunity to explore and record the views of the underprivileged, the disposed and the defeated—those who by virtue of being historically inarticulate have been overlooked in most stories of the past.

One area this relevance is noticeable is in the reconstruction of the African past. As Alagoa (1978:12) pointed out, most of the earlier records derived from European and Arabic sources (Written sources) must be considered external source material liable to the distortions and misrepresentations characteristic of such data. Therefore these sources cannot be regarded as the authentic history of the African past to be relied upon. The Arabic writers were more interested in the spread and influence of Islam on the economic, religious and political life of the African people. Therefore, they laid emphasis on the main centres of Islam in Africa neglecting the culture of the indigenous peoples, genealogies and the kingship patterns of the various communities in Africa. They extol Moslem kings like Mansa Kanku Musa of the Mali empire and Mai Idris Alooma of Bornu while non-Moslem kings like Sundiata of the Songhai empire was seen as a wicked king. The European writers of the 19<sup>th</sup> century did same when they came to Africa. They concluded that Africa had no history. To them the totality of the African history is the story of European activities in Africa. Therefore their emphasis was on the activities of the European traders, missionaries, explorers and the imposition of colonial rule on African States. In fact University of Ibadan External Students Programme lecture on the 'problem of sources in history' stated that For most of the African continent documentary evidence alone affords only a very imperfect basis for the writing of history.

Renowned historians like J.F. Ade Ajayi has used oral evidence to reconstruct the African history. Notable among these reconstructions is the history of Ijaye war (1860-1865). Quoting the work of Robert Hess, Fadeyiye (2004:45) noted that.

While doing his research (J.F. Ade Ajayi) he visited the battle sites and interviewed the residents of the areas affected by the war. Thus by examining the

written sources with the understandings gained... and by checking one source against another, he was able to produce a book which marks a step forward in African historiography.

Another historian J.A. Atanda also used Oral Evidence to reconstruct the history of Oyo Empire. He went to the areas and interviewed some chiefs and other prominent people who gave eyewitness accounts of the events narrated.

Another area oral evidence is relevant in the study of the African past is that it can be used to authenticate the written resources. As Alagoa (1978:12) succinctly declared,

If we are to study African history in the sense of the development of African institutions and people, it is clearly impossible to do this solely from the records of their rulers in European archives. Even the development of local archives in African countries does not fully answer this need for authentic local sources.

Since oral traditions are still relevant and alive in so many African rural communities, the oral traditions of these communities continue to be a vital part of our historical research for all periods of African history.

In recent times oral evidence has been used to authenticate the claims made by written sources. For example the claim by Egharevba that some parts of Yoruba land including Ekiti, Owo and Ondo were at one time under the Benin Kingdom was authenticated by Atanda in the oral evidence he collected from these areas. Oral evidence collected from Benin by Akinola also confirm that the founder of Eweka dynasty of Benin came from Ife.

Oral Evidence can also be used to correct the distortions and throw more light into some areas that are not adequately covered by the written sources. For example oral evidence can be used to throw more light on the activities of the European and the resistance by African leaders during the period of colonial rule in Africa. Oral evidence also becomes very relevant when dating of events become very necessary. Although oral evidence may not give the accurate date events occurred, if it is combined with account from linguistic sources it can give tentative dates for events such as origin, migration and settlements of groups.

### **Problems of Oral Evidence**

The researcher using oral evidence in the study of African history may be confronted with some problems. One of these problems is acceptability of oral evidence as source of reliable history of the African past. The problem that faced the researcher is how to make oral evidence acceptable to people who had extreme bias against the validity of oral evidence as source of African history. Alagoa (1978:14) took cognizance of this problem when he remarked that:

One objection against oral tradition (evidence) is that it cannot be a reliable record of the past because it is used more as a charter for present political and social or cultural structure than as a faithful report of past situations or events.

The researcher is faced with a big problem because there are people who believe that only written accounts can be trusted and so they do not attach any historical value to oral tradition or oral evidence.

The researcher using oral evidence may also face the problem of distortions. The distortions may be deliberate or accidental. It may be deliberate when the narrator decides to ignore some unpleasant facts in order not to bring his community into disrepute. It may also be accidental when as a result of the fallibility of human memory, the narrator forgets a vital fact and in attempt to satisfy the curiosity of the interviewer and boost his ego as custodian of knowledge gives wrong information, which the unsuspecting researcher records as evidence.

There is also the problem of chronology. In most cases the researcher using oral evidence is not able to give a satisfactory chronology of events as they happened. This makes it difficult for accurate dating of historic events. Moreover, oral evidence may not be able to answer all the questions the research many want to ask the informant. This may lead the researcher to interviewing other informants who many now give conflicting or contradictory evidences. It is the availability of these variant versions that makes it easy to detect distortions, which critics of oral evidence capitalize upon to say that oral evidence is not reliable.

Moreover, oral evidence accounts are in most cases superfluous. It merely emphasizes the immediate causes of an event without paying attention to the remote causes. The researcher in this case may not be able to give a thorough account of an event.

The research may also be confronted with the problem of finance. As already stated in the first paragraph, the researcher may need a tape recorder. To get a tape recorder of high quality the researcher needs money. He also needs money for some informants who may demand payments before giving out information. Besides, some informants may become suspicious when they see a researcher wanting to record the information they are giving out with a tape recorder. This is especially the case where the researcher is not from that community and the information required involves land disputes between two communities. They become afraid because they would not want to be quoted for any information given.

After the researcher has collected the oral evidence, he may still be confronted with the problem of documentation and storage of the information gathered.

Having returned home from the research trip the researcher may be confronted with the problem of how to reconcile the variations in the information he has gathered and how to preserve the tapes for the use of future generation of researchers. It must be noted that tapes are very delicate and if they are used too frequently they may be damaged.

The researcher may also be confronted with the problem of proper understanding and interpretation of the oral testimony he collected in the field. To have a thorough understanding of the testimonies it is important for the researcher to have an in-depth knowledge of the culture and thought systems of the community. Where this is lacked the researcher may give a literal interpretation to the information gathered, which may not be the proper interpretation of the oral testimony and by so doing gives misleading information.

Finally, the researcher may be faced with the problem of litigation. Commenting on the risk faced by the historian using oral evidence, Henige (1982:115) stated that.

There is the real possibility that the use of certain information, even if accurate may lead to libel suit.

This is becoming a more common danger to historians and in many cases the charge has not been that the material was incorrect or the interpretation of it unfair but only that the historian has used unfavourably information gratuitously, and hence maliciously.

The researcher faces this dilemma if the information he gathered involves embezzlement of public fund, rigging of elections or crimes against humanity of the recent past in which the perpetrators of such acts are still living. The researcher possessing such information holds his life and those of his informants in his hands. He needs counseling from mature scholars on what to do with the information he has gathered in order not to endanger his life and those of his informants.

## CONCLUSION

From our discussion it has been ascertained that oral evidence is very relevant in the study of the African history. It can be used to reconstruct the African past and thus correct the distortions and misrepresentations of the earlier written sources. With oral evidence, written sources can be authenticated and to some extent when combined with linguistic sources assist to give relative dating of historical events. Problems such as lack of acceptability, chronology, distortions, loss of memory, finance and to some extent litigation are some of the problems a researcher using oral evidence is likely to face. A historian using oral evidence should study the factors, which try to distort the evidence. They should be cautious in working through translations. Though there are problems in using oral evidence, with patience, care and ability to transcend his own cultural and educational bias and a resolve to be objective in reporting events the researcher can make good use of oral evidence in reconstructing African history.

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